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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal discourse in central Australia is characterized by a refusal to impose a way of thinking on others, and correct discourse either carries a consensus or is abandoned. In addition, participants avoid being exposed personally in public settings, and good interactional style forbids speakers from forcing themselves on fellow participants in a manner leading to such exposure. Embarrassment occurs when public attention becomes focused on a person in a way that individualizes his participation. This discourse structure conflicts with Anglo-Australian behavior in many kinds of intercultural interactions. Government representatives are impatient to reach decisive resolutions, and hesitation in Aboriginal assemblies may result in loss of beneficial agreements. Aboriginal children in Australian schools often fail to respond to questions when singled out in class, and answers are often single words and highly repetitive of what has already been said. In addition, Aboriginal children speak when not addressed and often fail to "take turns", a hallmark of Aboriginal speech collaboration that generally goes unrecognized. Australian eductors have viewed the secondary socialization of Aboriginal children in Australian schools as an effort to individualize their collective modes of self-perception and social interaction. Such interactional asymmetries are repeated throughout Australian society in all ordinary intercultural contacts, and the Anglo-Australians' relative assertiveness assists their dominance over Aboriginal people. (MSE)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA*

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The Aboriginal people of central Australia have evolved a unique form of public discourse. Ordinary public discussion among the Pitjantjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi, and other Western Desert dialect groups proceeds within the contraint that a consensus among discussion participants be preserved. The preservation of this consensus is achieved by the unassertiveness of participants, avoidance of direct argumentation, a deferral of topics which will produce disharmony, and, above all, by an objectification of discourse which is effected by a serial production of summary accounts of the participants' deliberations.

Ordinary Western Desert Aboriginal discourse is characterized by a perpetual monitoring of the progress of a group's discussion, a monitoring which takes the form of a round-the-rally repetition of a candidate summary account for the ongoing talk at hand. These summary accounts, and their repetition, are produced in rapid succesStion with little regard for who the particular speakers may be, with no respect for proprietary rights to a turn of speaking, without direction from a formal leader or leaders, and generally with the vociferous vocal participation of all present parties.

The serial production of summary accounts constitutes an objective formulation of the talk at hand, displaying (i.e., making publicly available) the developing achievement of the participants in such a way that the parties

*This paper was presented at the "Urban Communication and Social Inequality" colloquium at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, 1981. The colloquium was organized by John Gumperz.

may move forward in their thinking together--oriented to the objective version of their developing talk--so that when they have secured any substantial conclusion it is already a conclusion which is unanimous. If any dissension is present, the round-the-rally production of accounts is halted and in most instances the gathering will abandon attempts to force a decision. There is a strict refusal to force a way of thinking upon others, and so Aboriginal parties will only ratify what is universally supported. Correct Aboriginal discourse is that in which the parties "all speak with one voice" ("wangka kutjungka").

Throughout Western Desert public discussion, participants are concerned to avoid being exposed personally in public settings, and good interactional style forbids speakers from forcing themselves on fellow participants in a manner that will lead to any such exposure. Embarrassment occurs when public attention becomes focused upon a person in a way that individualizes his participation. Argument and direct confrontation are avoided, and the success of interaction very much depends upon participants being unassertive and remaining open for the collective will of the group. An embarrassed participant has the prerogative of keeping silent, and fellow participants will assist by leading the conversation into other directions. Above all, there is an emphasis upon the mutuality of speakers and a devaluation of egoistic presentations of self.

Such a structure of discourse has struck Anglo-Australians with whom Aboriginal people have occasional relations as disorderly, excessively repetitive and as occupying more time than is necessary for making adequate decisions. The first explorers and settlers observed such congenial, collaboratively produced talk and considered it to be evidence of a lack of civilization on the Aboriginals' part. Writing in 1789 (p.56), Tench observed

Aboriginals "talking to each other at the same time with such rapidity and vociferation as I had never before heard." Flinders noted (1814: 66),

> the manners of these people are quick and vehement, and their conversation vociferous like that of most uncivilized people.

And the Frenchman Peron wrote (1809: 217):

> the passions were strongly marked, as they succeeded each other in rapid succession, and their whole figure was changed and modified with their affections.

The vital role of unanimity in Aboriginal experience and the fact that the Aboriginals' capability of proceeding "with one voice" is in fact highly respectful of individual feelings and opinions is something persons of European descent have not appreciated. Accustomed to their own procedures of individualized and dialectical discourse, Europeans have been unable to engage in structures of discourse that are traditional to Aboriginal people.

Representatives from the government, engaging in negotiations with Aboriginal people on a variety of matters, are impatient to reach decisive resolutions. The Aboriginal reluctance to make a decision which fails to meet their consensual standards calls for their taking considerable time before any meaningful decision can occur. Frequently, hesitation by Aboriginal assemblies results in their failure to take advantage of the presence of high ranking government officials to strike agreements which would be to their benefit. The one day limits which constrain the visits of such officials to remote outback communities almost guarantees such failure. Alternatively, the impatience of Europeans may unintentionally force Aboriginal people to make decisions that have not received the customary validation which can come only from the serial articulation of summary accounts. The inclination of Aboriginal people to preserve congenial relations and their social unassertiveness (both to be

distinguished from deference behavior) can lead them to bend under the weight of unintentionally assertive government officials, thereby producing an "agreement" which satisfies the visiting officials but has no real basis.

Throughout Anglo-Australian society traditionally oriented Aboriginal people find themselves confronted by a society whose modes of discursive interaction are contradictory to their own. This is readily apparent in Australian courts of law, where failure to appreciate opposition as a structural feature of English jurisprudence results in Aboriginal people presuming a personal antagonism which in many instances does not exist. Embarrassed by being personally exposed in a public setting and faced with highly assertive courtroom personnel, Aboriginal people find it difficult to articulate a defense, and very frequently concur with any matter that is proposed to them. In this illustration, the Aboriginal defendant agrees with whatever the magistrate suggests:

Magistrate: Can you read and write?
Aboriginal Defendant: Yes.
Sergeant: Can you sign your name?
A: Yes.
M: Did you say you cannot read?
A: Hm.
M: Can you read or not?!
A: No.
M: [Reads statement.] Do you recall making that statement?
A: Yes.
M: Is there anything else you want to add to the statement?
A: [No answer.]
M: Did you want to say anything else!?
A: No.
M: Is there anything in the statement you want to change?
A: No.
M: [Reads a second statement.] Do you recall making that statement?
A: Yes.
M: Do you wish to add to the statement?
A: No.
M: Do you want to alter the statement in any way?
A: [Slight nod.]

M: What do you want to alter"
A: [No answer.]
M: Do you want to change the statement?
(1) A: No. (Liberman 1981)

It is doubtful that the Aboriginal understands very much, and it is also questionable whether his "statement," previously tendered to police officers at the station, has any value. He is only guessing what answers will best placate the court, and he generally succeeds in providing the court with what it requires, the exercise of justice notwithstanding. Anglo-Australians miss the overwhelmingly gratuitous character to the Aboriginals' agreement.

A successful defense requires a vigorous ability to argue one's point, but such discourse skills are not common among Aboriginals, whose rhetorical capabilities are more subtle and less confrontational. Unfamiliar with the structure of interaction in Australian courts, Aboriginal people are uncertain even about when they can speak and how much they may say. In example (2) the Aboriginal Jimmy is doing little more than searching for the place where he may begin to present his side of the story:

Constable: Jimmy, I am going to have to talk to you about something that happened yesterday, do you understand that?
Jimmy: Yes.
C: I want you to understand that you do not have to speak to me if you don't want to, do you understand that?
J: Yes.
C: What I will do is type on this paper what we say, and it may later be shown to the magistrate in court, do you
10 understand that?
J: Yes.
C: Do you have to speak to me? (Translator translates.)
J: Yes.
C: Can you tell me what that means?
J: (No answer.)
C: Do you want to tell me anything?
J: Yes.
C: What do you want to talk about?
J: We bin camping we go ask 'im Leo what happened last night....(Legal Aid Bulletin 1976: 116-19)

The Aboriginal person's operating strategy here involves a procedure of sense-assembly locally contingent to the particulars available to him at each turn of speaking. His responses are his best guesses at what will be the least offensive. In a court of law the Aboriginal's natural prerogative to remain silent when talk becomes too individualized is inoperative (even when defendant rights permit silence), and the rules of the court forbid the repetitive discussion with which Aboriginal people are comfortable. During examination-in-chief, the repetition of questions is not allowed, and this seriously constrains the ability of the prosecutors and Aboriginal witnesses from developing an order for the talk which the Aboriginal witness can recognize and rely upon. Even taking oaths is problematic:

Clerk: The evidence you shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God? Do you understand that?
Aboriginal Witness: (No answer.)
C: Please say, "So help me God."
A: (No answer.)
C: Say, "So help me God."
A: (No answer.)
3 (Court accepts the Aboriginal's silence.)

...
Magistrate: He didn't say, "So help me God."
Clerk: Say, "So help me God."
Aboriginal Witness: So help me God.

Occasionally the meaning of the oath is translated for Aboriginal witnesses by a court appointed translator, but these translations--"wangka palya" ("talk good") and "wangka tjukurala" ("talk straight"), and the like--create more difficulties than they solve. "Wangka palya" is often used at Aboriginal gatherings, when no Europeans are present, to mean, "Let's keep our talk harmonious," and this translation of the oath will likely be interpreted as something like, "Don't make anyone upset," an instruction damaging to an

Aboriginal person's willingness to defend himself in the court. Here again, the more forceful and aggressive style of Europeans is able to overwhelm their Aboriginal partners.

Aboriginal children suffer from similar difficulties when in attendance at Australian schools. The other papers to be presented here elaborate in particular detail the structurally based conflicts which may occur in intercultural communication in classrooms. Australian researchers (Malcolm 1979) have found that white teachers complain about Aboriginal children's failure to respond to questions, the inadequate volume of Aboriginal speakers' voices, and failure to look up or to look the teacher "in the eye." These problems result from the Aboriginal child feeling embarrassed when called upon to stand up and address the class in the individualized and exposed manner common to European classroom discourse. In Aboriginal society it is impolite to look directly into another person's eyes; looking aside, speaking moderately, and even covering one's face slightly with one's hands are all actions which demonstrate a commendable self-depreciation and respect for others. Silence is not viewed to be insolence; on the contrary, it is evidence of good manners. What is more, any egoistic behavior is out of place.

Australian teachers also complain that Aboriginal answers, when given, are too frequently single-worded responses and are highly repetitive of what has already been said. Single-worded responses are common summary accounts, even preferable ones since Aboriginal interlocutors strive to capsulize their collaboratively produced accounts in the briefest possible objective form (cf. Liberman 1982). And repetition is the delight of Aboriginal discursive life--it permits all participants to share in the produced agreement and is the vehicle for a celebration of congeniality. Further, teachers complained that requests

of the children are more like statements or observations, but this is consistent with their avoidance of personalized talk and their inclination to proceed according to objective statements.

Teachers report that Aboriginal chidren say too little when called upon to speak, yet talk too much when they are not being addressed, and that much of such talk is characterized by a failure to wait for another to finish speaking, a failure to "take turns." Like Tench and Flinders two centuries before, the coherence of the serial order of Aboriginal talk is missed and the network of interlocutors collaborating in a productive effort is unrecognized. For the Aborig'nals' part, they are confronted by notions of "proper decorum" when they find not only strange but suspect. While the Aboriginal children are participating as an ensemble, monitoring their behavior carefully with regard to the other Aboriginal children in the class (Malcolm 1979: 478), the teacher is perceiving them as a gathering of individual members. In such a fashion teachers miss essentially the mutuality which is the basis of the Aboriginals' participation in the class.

In fact, Australian educators have viewed the secondary socialization of Aboriginal children in Australian schools as a frank effort to individualize their collective modes of self-perception and social interaction:

> School helps the child to move away from collective to individualistic orientation. This is the movement for autonomy. By acquiring knowledge the child begins to acquire a status. Increased internal control helps a child to live as an individual, and as a person. Development of personal autonomy - freedom to choose a life and freedom to live it - is a necessary function of school. However, this may increase comptetitive orientation in the child. He may have problems of working together with other members. This problem may be a realistic one. (Pareek 1976: 106)

Such interactional asymetries are repeated throughout Australian society, in all the ordinary contacts Aboriginal people have with Anglo-Australians. Disagreement is viewed by whites to be a mark of one's individuality and ability to think for oneself; frequently, it is considered an asset to be a 'good competitor." The unobtrusive style of Aboriginal people leads to their being easily dismissed as being without substance. When European interaction individualizes the participants, Aboriginal people feel embarrassed, and this limits their effectiveness. The more forceful style of self-presentation of Anglo-Australians is sometimes viewed to be evidence of anger where none exists. What is certain is that the relative assertiveness of most Europeans in ordinary interaction assists their dominance over Aboriginal people.

For the most part, Anglo-Australians are unaware of the constraints which their style of sociability places upon Aboriginal people, for they know it only as their natural mode of participation in social life. Regrettably, Aboriginal failures to satisfy European demands of discourse are viewed to be grounds for their reeducation, ad hoc or by way of formal institutions. It may be said that after a century of contact in central Australia, such reeduction has met with little success, as Aboriginal people have adhered to their own structures of interaction. Is is unfortunate, however, that so few of these mutually produced obstacles to communication, occurring as structural features of Aboriginal/Anglo-Australian interaction, have been recognized by the parties involved.

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